

AHCE Team Interviews Dr Julie Bajic Smith (PhD), Registered Psychologist

Q: What is your role and what does Wise Care do?

Wise Care exists to help aged care providers recognise that mental wellbeing in elders affects all aspects of their business. From initial client engagement to service delivery and exiting services and from staff onboarding to retention and the management of risk of compassion fatigue and burnout. Wise Care is perfect for providers who have client disengagement due to declining health and social isolation. When they work with us, they achieve better client engagement and reduce risk of compromised mental wellbeing.

My role as a psychology consultant is to help organisations minimise the risk of elders experience mental health conditions. Through internal audit, range of industry endorsed staff training programs and licensed group program we tackle these risks. I believe that we all play a role in noticing mental wellbeing changes in our elders and at Wise Care I help providers optimise mental wellbeing of the elderly in their care. We support aged care professionals who may have a limited understanding on mental wellbeing in late life. When they work with us, they achieve practical strategies in how to support their clients day-to-day and improve engagement.

Q: The last two years have emotionally been difficult for the aged and home care, how are Wise Care programs supporting the sector?

The effects of the pandemic have shaken up the sector and further impacted the already fragile state of many elders with declining physical health. Even before the pandemic, we know that 50% of elders experience symptoms of depression and further isolation and lack of social engagement has been detrimental on their health. Staffing perspective, huge workload on already exhausted workforce and practically the impact of wearing PPE, masks and social distancing has had impact on engagement with elders and communication.

We have amended some of the content for our group programs, allowing individual delivery by accredited facilitators (employees within the organisation trained to run the programs) across a number of sites. This has been popular and effective strategy helping those who are in isolation feel less lonely and more connected to their strengths and abilities.

I have also been running webinars, free resources and support for staff and families across various organisations. It is a common mistake to assume mental health outcomes are responsibility of experts. However, to improve mental health outcomes requires providing support to everybody which is what Wise Care does. We take a holistic approach to mental wellbeing in late life and shared responsibility across different professions. We help to upskill workers so they can recognise deterioration and escalate concerns. We also talk about how you can include families in the process.

Q: What is the Wellness Adventure Program and who is it for?

The award-winning Wellness Adventure Program is designed to boost resilience and enhance wellbeing in the elders who may be at risk of developing mental health conditions. Traditionally this program was only offered in residential settings but this year we have had enquiries to expand the program to retirement living. It is not uncommon for people who live in retirement villages to require support for adjustment, grief and loss as well as loneliness. On completion of a recent

program, participants reported a 50% decrease (88% down to 38%) in their perceived risk of developing depression compared with how they felt before starting their Wellness Adventure (April–June 2021).

Wellness Adventure Program is a licensed product for organisations keen to make a difference in the risk of mental wellbeing of their clients. We deliver all the content to run groups and support to the organisation throughout the 12 month agreement. We train wider workforce in recognising residents who may be risk of developing mental health conditions, encouraging participation and involving families. This is a process which has been refined over the last 10 years to

Q: Does this program take a lot of staff's time?

As with any learning, the initial stage is a bit more time consuming as staff complete the accreditation process, but in total it is about 10 hours stretched over a month. Our advantage is that the part of the accreditation process (the initial 6h ours) is an endorsed activity by the Australian College of Nursing (CAN) and Australian Community Workers Association (ACWA), training is easy, self-paced, relevant to what workers encounter in their shifts and holistic.

Our accredited facilitators have said *"I am so excited to be part of this project and to see the changes in my residents – they enjoy getting out of their rooms and our sessions i has been transformational."* Lifestyle Coordinator."

A Facility Manager recently shared *"we have received such amazing feedback regarding this training and the ongoing rollout."*

Lifestyle Coordinator emailed saying 'we held our first class this week and WOW what a response. I feel like I gained as much or more than my beautiful residents. The communication between the residents opened up so many pathways. I'm truly blessed to be a part of something so beautiful.'

Q: Do you have any feedback from the participants?

Yes, feedback from program participants has been great:

'I liked it very much. We got to know each other better. It was different to being in the dining room. I recommend this group to others.'

'I don't normally like groups but I enjoyed it. The subject matter was interesting. I say to others it's worth giving it a go.'

How do people connect with you?

Look me up on LinkedIn or visit wisecare.com.au

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